

## Where on Earth is Tonga?

From Bob Preston, W7TSQ/YB3ASQ, of Edmonds, Washington, comes this story of how he spent his winter vacation in the warmth of the "Friendly Islands."

Where on Earth is Tonga? That's a question many of our friends asked when we mentioned our vacation destination. It started during the winter of 1992-93. Particularly severe here in the Pacific Northwest, it was made even more so to us because we had spent four of the past six years in Indonesia. My wife, Helen, suggested that she'd like to be somewhere with palm trees and a sandy beach. On the other hand, I felt the siren's call to become hunted DX again. So the search was on. The requirements were simple; although I admire those who go to places like Svalbard, Bouvet, South Sandwich and Peter I, I'll admit to getting a little soft in my old age, preferring decent hotels, air conditioning, decent drinking water and an airline flight. Some limited checking into the Caribbean didn't show anyplace that seemed to fit our needs, so I began looking into the South Pacific. We'd already been to Tahiti, how about others?

I selected a few to consider and sent for the foreign-licensing package from ARRL HQ. I wrote a few letters to people who had operated at some of the places under consideration. One of them was to Charlotte Richardson, KQ1F, of Hudson, Massachusetts, who had done a few of the islands on a combination diving/DXing vacation with Paul Young, K1XM. Paul sent back a nice response with several useful bits of information, that pointed us more toward Tonga and Fiji. I began to pursue these two, as I had written a friend in the Cooks with no response. I had worked Craig Thompson, A35CT, for a new one on 18 MHz, so I added a note with the "green stamp" and QSL card request. Craig sent back an interesting letter, so after checking the *DXpeditioner's Worldwide Licensing Guide* by Craig Maxey, KH8AL, of Beaverton, Oregon, and visiting the Seattle Travel Show, Tonga became the final choice.

Part of the equation was the 3Y0PI DXpedition to Peter I Island. Because I had missed the VP8SSI DXpedition in the South Sandwich Islands by being in Indonesia, I was determined not to miss this one. This suggested a mid-February departure date and the timing would be right for operating in the ARRL CW and SSB DX contests. I called to arrange travel plans, hoping to operate one contest from Samoa, the other from Tonga. We were too late making arrangements, however, and had to book on Tongan Air, which doesn't stop at Apia. After exchanging several notes with A35CT, we decided to do Tonga for a month. Because Jim Smith, VK9NS, had scheduled stops at Niutopautapu Island and the Ha'apai Group, I thought that Tonga'tapu (OC 049) and Vava'u (OC 064) might be in more demand for followers of the RSGB Islands on the Air (IOTA) award. As usually happens, when we



The Annual Convention of the Tongan Society including (l-r) the Bob Preston, A35SQ; Craig Thompson, A35CT; Kevin Burke, A35KB; and A35AP. Seated are Helen Preston, Dawn Thompson and Sue, the long-suffering wives.

arrived at LAX in Los Angeles, we checked in with Royal Tongan Air only to find that we'd actually be flying on an Air Polynesia Boeing 767, with a stop at Apia, Western Samoa. Live and learn. After a 13-hour flight, we arrived at Fua'amotu International Airport on Tonga'tapu, where we were met by Craig and his lovely wife, Dawn.

### Time Traveling

Tonga is at 175°W longitude, and stretches from 17°S to 21°S longitude. The "Friendly Islands" are truly "Where Our World First Sees the Light of Day." Yes, the International Date Line is at 180°. But check closely and you'll see that it jogs eastward to include Tonga in "tomorrow." Folklore has it that one of the past kings decided he wanted to be on the same time as New Zealand. Today, Tonga's 170 islands are home to 100,000 people, but in the 13th century, the kingdom of Tonga constituted a Polynesian Empire of the South Pacific that stretched to Fiji, Rotuma, Samoa and Niue.

Customs was no problem. Years of travel experience says never volunteer anything to a customs or immigration person, just answer the questions honestly. This time they never even asked if we had anything to declare. With all the luggage safely in the back of Craig's pickup, we went back to look for the antenna crate. I had purposely arranged the length of the crate to be 2½ meters long, which I understood was a limit. Although Alaska Airlines had reluctantly accepted the crate with a "slight" charge for excess baggage, Royal Tongan would not. It had to go as air freight because it "would not fit into a container." Where did we find it? In the bottom (smallest) part of a container! Now customs was interested! After declaring a reasonable value (for a 20-year-old beam and a vertical), the customs agent added the air-freight cost (about twice the declared value) and came up with a fee. I never saw a book or

schedule. I also made the mistake of saying these would never leave the country. They're now in use at A35CT, where they've replaced Craig's "coconut long wire."

We proceeded to the International Date-line Hotel where we had made our initial reservations. Helen said okay as a hotel, but no way was this what she wanted. No beach, some palm trees, but all within the hotel compound, and not tall enough for an antenna. Dawn spoke to her friend, the controller of the hotel, and about 30 minutes later, Robert, the maintenance engineer, came to see where I wanted the antenna. Shortly thereafter, the vertical was mounted from the eaves of the roof and A35SQ was on the air!

### Accommodations

The next morning, we hooked a boat excursion to a couple of the nearby island resorts. Luckily, Helen's first choice had generator power 24 hours a day and had no problems with antennas. So two days later, we headed for the Royal Sunset Beach Resort on Atata Island and our waterfront cabin. Even with no air conditioning, good fans and an offshore breeze made it quite nice. The plant engineer, A35NL/ZL1NL, found a 5-gallon bucket filled with concrete and a pipe in the center. Using this as a mount and 40-pound fishing line for guys, we set up the vertical antenna at the water's edge. This got me on the air about 12 hours before the start of the ARRL CW DX contest. It's amazing to see the size of the pileup that can be generated by 100 W to a vertical, especially on 40 meters. The prefix was worth about 20 dB. Without 80 meters, I made 1275 QSOs. Finally, on the day after the contest, I got the G5RV up and made 60 QSOs on 80 meters. I'm not a great CW operator by any means, but I did my best. I believe I was the only really active participant, because A35JJ told me he worked only a few people.

The following weekend we went to

"town," where Craig and Dawn gave us a complete tour of the main island of Tonga'tapu. Because I hadn't been able to find a notebook computer to use, I hadn't taken any logging programs and I was dreading duping the logs by hand. Fortunately, Craig lent me his portable, which had a good spreadsheet program to check and score my contest log. Craig isn't a contester, but I explained the rules well enough to him that he recognized how much time was wasted hand logging and entering QSOs later, and in one afternoon he put together a program for me to use for the SSB contest.

Our second island was Vava'u, larger than Atata. We stayed at the Paradise International Hotel, an excellent three-star facility and without doubt the best hotel in the kingdom. We put the vertical on top of a 10-foot pipe lashed to the second-floor stairwell railing. This wasn't the greatest place for it because the roof wasn't that far away, and there was a hill to the north that seemed to impede propagation, but not the path to Australia and New Zealand. I'd never known there were so many active New Zealand amateurs. Between the location and decaying propagation conditions, I only made 650 contacts in the SSB contest, and felt like I was begging harder than if I'd been home in W7. The greatest problem came on Monday morning (remember the Dateline), when, during the middle of a fair run on 10 meters, I was advised that I was tearing up the telephone and fax lines in the charter boat office on the floor below.

Because of poor propagation, we took time off to walk to the town (actually a small village) three or four times. We also took a van excursion over part of the island. Another day was spent sailing on a 50-foot ketch with a wonderful young couple. This all-day event included lunch and snorkeling. Unlike the Tonga'tapu group, which is quite flat, the Vava'u group is hilly, with some hills 100 meters high.

On our last day, we flew back to Tonga'tapu, where Craig and Dawn picked us up and parked us at their house while they returned to work. After work, we went out for good pizza and the National Tongan Society Annual Convention. Because we had spouses or guests, the restaurant had to bring over another table to accommodate us. In attendance were A35AP, A35CT, A35KB and me, A35SQ.

Accommodations on Tonga range from guest houses to the two places where we stayed, with prices ranging from \$30 to \$110 per day. On Tonga'tapu, the Good Samaritan is reasonable, with some beach and a pretty good restaurant. It's somewhat far from town, but "negotiable" cabs are available. If you're not there for luxury, but primarily to operate a ham station, it's a good place.

The Fafa Island Resort isn't recommended because it uses solar power or a generator that shuts down at 2300 local time. A nice German couple runs it, and the food is satisfactory. The husband was gone, however, and the wife told me that the solar power was fused for 200 W—not enough for my transceiver.

The Royal Sunset, although not cheap, had a good restaurant and free use of windsurfers, small sailboats and kayaks, and snorkel gear.

On Vava'u we looked at the Tongan Beach Resort. It's on the beach and has a restaurant, and the hills to the north aren't too great. It's



BOB PRESTON W7TSS

Craig Thompson, A35CT, and his wife, Dawn, were most helpful during the Prestons' stay in Tonga.

quite a distance from town, though, over very bad roads. The owner wasn't available to explain the policy on Amateur Radio.

January through March is the rainy (hurricane) season, and the off season for tourism, so any guest is welcome.

The Paradise International would have been much better if we hadn't been so close to the charter boat office.

Except for Tonga'tapu, there's not much in the way of tourist attractions. The Tongan Cultural Center has a program and dinner twice a week. It has several buildings devoted to various crafts, with basketweaving that is some of the best I've ever seen. Shopping can be done quickly because there isn't that much to buy.

We had a great time, although my wife finally decided she was getting bored. The weather was too hot to do much walking, and Helen read more books than she had in the past year. We enjoyed our trip, though, and I hope you found A35SQ in your log.

### JOANIE BRANSON, KA6V/7, SK

No, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to become a beloved individual in the DX community, but it doesn't hurt. The fact is, Joanie Branson, KA6V, was a rocket scientist, working first at Cape Canaveral, and later moving to Texas to help the Air Force. While there, she met her husband-to-be, Jerry (now AA6BB), another rocket scientist, who was working on the Atlas missile. After a short romance, the two created a wonderful team after their marriage in 1960.

They ended up in California and finally, after years of wanting to be radio amateurs, Joanie and Jerry enrolled in a class. Joanie had been introduced to the hobby by her uncle. They soon had their licenses and Joanie quickly proved to be a natural on the air, coming across on the radio waves as if she were sitting in the room with her friends. And in the years since 1974, she repaid her teacher by helping more

than 300 people become radio amateurs.

Meanwhile, the antenna farm began to grow, progressing from a "bonnet" antenna, to towers of irrigation tubing, to a wonderful antenna farm at their place in Junction City, Oregon.

While still in southern California, Joanie was involved with many nets: the Country Cousins (of which she was president for a couple of years), the Northwest Country Cousins, the YL System, Golden Bear, WestCARS and Mission Trail, holding office in the latter three. Her first love, however, was always DX.

She was a Life Member of the ARRL, the Heard Island DX Association, International DX Association, YL Radio League, Ten-Ten International, ALARA, IDXF and ISSB. She was a field checker for ARRL and CQ awards. Getting on the air to run pileups of low-power Japanese stations (always "QSL is sure") and contests were active interests. In recent years, just getting on the air was bound to create a pileup of her own.

Joanie became well-known through her work with the original W7PHO Family Hour group, taking over the net when Bill Bennett, W7PHO, became a Silent Key. Many low-power stations tasted their first DX success through her efforts on this net.

Perhaps Joanie and Jerry became best known through their efforts as QSL managers. Beginning in 1979 with her first station, KC6HA, she and Jerry managed 67 stations. Perhaps their biggest effort as managers were the VP8SS1 and 3Y0PI DXpeditions.

Although Joanie was an ARRL A-1 Operator (with certificate to prove it), perhaps the most memorable thing about her was the warm, gentle, caring nature she always exhibited, whether to a newly licensed ham or a "big gun" DXer. She cared about people and was an "Elmira" to all. Loved by everyone, not just the DXers, she was even able to get the nonham neighbors involved in the QSL card work.

Jerry, AA6BB/7, will miss her the most; they were a team. The QSL cards from the 3Y0PI operation are a tribute to her efforts. Even as the cards went out, notes from Joanie accompanied more than a few. Those fortunate enough to have worked this DXpedition should treasure their QSL cards because each one was confirmed out of love and respect for Joanie. No one who knew her will ever forget her. We'll all miss this fine lady of DX.

Joan Branson, KA6V (1927-1994), SK.

### NEW JA AIRMAIL RATES

Nao Mashita, JA1HGY, has notified us of new airmail rates now in effect for Japan.

They are:

	Asia, Guam	North and Central America, Europe, CIS, Pacific, Middle East	S. America, Africa
10 grams	90 yen	110 yen	130 yen
20 grams	150 yen	190 yen	230 yen

Currently, one IRC is exchangeable for up to 130 yen. The exchange rate for Japanese yen is currently about 100 Yen per US dollar.

What does that mean to us? First, it means that two IRCs will buy you more postage in Japan than two Greenstamps. Also, inaking a wise choice of envelopes may make a difference. As an example, I weighed my QSL card with a 4 1/4 x 6 1/2-inch airmail envelope. The weight was 0.2 ounce. With a no. 10 business-size envelope, it was 0.3 ounce. However, the new four-sided QSL card used by many DXpeditions boosts the weight to 0.3 ounce for the airmail envelope, and 0.4 ounce for the no. 10. Ten grams is equal to 0.35 ounce, so use of the no. 10 envelope would throw you up to the next weight class. It's far better to use foreign airmail envelopes and IRCs. **[QSL]**